

**Hamsa**

Journal of Judaic and Islamic Studies

**10 | 2024**

**Varia**

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## Mobility, Change, and A Shared History

The Ottoman Jewish Printing Press in Istanbul Alongside Turkish-Muslim Print

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**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/hamsa/4557>

ISSN: 2183-2633

**Publisher**

CIDEHUS - Centro Interdisciplinar de História Culturas e Sociedades da Universidade de Évora

**Electronic reference**

Mark Titleman, "Mobility, Change, and A Shared History", *Hamsa* [Online], 10 | 2024, Online since 21 October 2024, connection on 21 October 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/hamsa/4557>

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# Mobility, Change, and A Shared History

The Ottoman Jewish Printing Press in Istanbul Alongside Turkish-Muslim Print

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## Introduction

- 1 The longstanding Ottoman Jewish printing press, while not overly productive or impactful on the world stage, has been an item of curiosity owing to its very old age. Standing in stark contrast is the Turkish-Muslim printing press which was established nearly three hundred years later. The juxtaposition of these historical facts begs many questions: What influence did external actors have on Ottoman printing technology? What did Europeans think of its eventual adoption? What forms of mobility in Jewish print material and technology existed before 1727 in the Ottoman Empire, and how did they interact with the creation of a Turkish-Muslim printing press during the Tulip Era? The Ottoman Jewish printing press, with emphasis on its pre-modern center in Istanbul, serves as the focal point here in addressing these questions. It displayed a surprisingly early secularization similar to that of the larger Ottoman Empire with the additional mobility unique to printing. The late adoption of the Ottoman printing press can be seen from the lens of long development as opposed to a force of "Western modernization" – its fate intertwined with preceding strands of mobility and secularization, and its development parallel to an Ottoman Jewish printing press that is itself of high historical interest.

## Beginnings of Ottoman Print as Jewish Print

- 2 In 1727, the first Turkish-Muslim printing house, the State Printing House or *Dar al-Tiba'a al-'Amira*, was founded in Istanbul with the approval of Sultan Ahmed III by Yirmisekizçelebi Mehmet, his son Yirmisekizzade Mehmet Said, Damat İbrahim Paşa,

and the scholar İbrahim Müteferrika, with the latter viewing it as an ideologically driven private pursuit to maintain book printing from 1729 to 1742 through much exertion and sacrifice. Müteferrika would become synonymous with Ottoman printing in the Turkish historiography; his desire to emulate European models in the name of progress a source of discussion, his Hungarian-Christian story of origin the object of fascination to contemporary European intellectuals, and his role as an agent of change much debated to this day.<sup>123</sup> These questions in the historiography of Ottoman print culture all imply themes of Western modernization. More recent historians have argued that science and technology emerged in the Ottoman Empire as an integration of different language and epistemic cultures through the vernacular survival of older texts and the coarticulation of Muslim and minority knowledge traditions.<sup>4</sup> Rather than emphasizing modernization, historical paradigms implicating marketplaces, networks, and internal and external mobility can be brought to the fore to show an organic evolution of Ottoman printing from its 1493 introduction by the Ottoman Jewish community through its official adoption during the Tulip Era by Müteferrika and his colleagues.

- 3 Ottoman book culture had long reflected the cosmopolitan identity of the empire. Both manuscript and print books circulated in Turkish, Arabic, Farsi, Armenian, Greek, Kurdish, Hebrew, and Ladino (Judeo-Spanish). It was fifty years after Gutenberg developed the moveable-type printing press that Sultan Beyazid II sanctioned the establishment of the very first printing house in Istanbul in 1493 by David and Samuel Ibn Nahmias, members of a new and highly mobile minority community of Sephardic Jewish refugees from Europe that would come to number around 60 000 after 1492.<sup>5</sup> At this time the printing press was allowed only for non-Muslim communities. Ladino, a Romance language similar to fifteenth-century Castilian with Hebrew script, was the language of common parlance as opposed to Hebrew, which was reserved for religious purposes. The three largest centers of Ladino culture would become Istanbul, Izmir and Salonica, the last one receiving its first printing press in 1512 from Yehuda Gedalia with type brought from Portugal.<sup>6</sup> During the sixteenth century, however, most Ottoman Jewish printing was done in Hebrew.<sup>7</sup>
- 4 The first publication from the Nahmias brothers was Rabbi Jacob ben Asher's previously published fourteenth-century Hebrew work *Arba'ah Turim* (Four Orders of the Code of Law), edited by Rabbi Elia ha-Levi and released in Istanbul on 13 December 1493 to promulgate knowledge of Jewish law to Ottoman Jews.<sup>8</sup> This was a large volume consisting of over 800 folio pages. The Nahmias brothers had been connected with a press in Híjar that was the second most prominent Hebrew printing centre in Spain, and added additional expertise in the form of print material and technology while stopping in Naples on their way to Istanbul.<sup>9</sup> They would print from 1493 until 1518, after which new families including the Soncino family and the Parnas Harofe family established presses in Istanbul to print mainly religious content. The publication of *Arba'ah Turim* itself, while being curious in a city and region that had not yet known printing, was emblematic of the mobility and expertise endemic to the technology and its employment. The construction of the book and printing quality indicate a significant adeptness at the craft. The type and beginning decorative initial are clearly of Spanish origin and the semi-cursive typeface is of Neapolitan origin.<sup>10</sup> The book was an important publication. Adri Offenberger claimed that *Arba'ah Turim* in all its forms "can without a doubt be called a bestseller among the Hebrew incunabula:

including editions of its separate parts, at least thirteen editions of this work appeared within twenty years.”<sup>11</sup>

## Ottoman Jewish Print and the International Marketplace

- 5 The subsequent growth of Ottoman Jewish printing and its rapid embeddedness in an international marketplace is revealed by many works, particularly one inspired by *Arba'ah Turim*: Joseph Caro's *Shulhan Aruch* (Set Table). This widely disseminated halachic code, originating from within the Ottoman Empire, would ultimately unify religious and everyday life practices of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews in the Empire and abroad in a way of which only print technology was capable. It was printed everywhere, with an abridged Ladino version of this code entitled *Mesa de el Alma* appearing in Ottoman Salonica in 1568. A publisher of a later version of this book stated its text was, “Ladino of full letters with vowel-points, so that all can make use of it, even he who knows no more than the letter and the vowels,”<sup>12</sup> as vowels in Hebrew script are an additional guide unnecessary to a seasoned reader. Another demonstration of the trans-Ottoman nature of Jewish printing was the Hebrew treatise *Ta'ame haMitzvot* (Reasons for the Commandments) of Rabbi Menahem ben Moses ha-Bavli, which arrived from the Ottoman Empire as a manuscript and was printed in Lublin by Eliezer ben Itzhak Ashkenazi in 1571.<sup>13</sup>
- 6 This relationship with the international market, as evidenced from trade in its finished products and the engagement of diverse expertise, was a major aspect of mobility in Istanbul's Jewish printing. The aforementioned Eliezer ben Itzhak and his son arrived with their own printing tools from Lublin to Istanbul in 1575, procuring employment and patronage from members of three different Jewish communities (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Romaniote) – a feat only possible in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>14</sup> Istanbul had been chosen as a locus of Jewish printing in part because of its prior existence as a trans-regional centre of Jewish culture and education. This centrality in location and Jewish culture, as well as its religious tolerance, proximity to the Holy Land, Jewish book market, and intellectual connections to Jewish scholars, attracted printers from abroad.<sup>15</sup> While the bulk of Jewish printers in Istanbul were Iberian exiles, they eventually arrived from Salonica, Izmir, Italy, Prague, Poland and Russia.<sup>16</sup> The converted printer Samuel Helicz found Istanbul sufficiently welcoming to relocate there for reconversion.<sup>17</sup> This trans-Ottoman nature of Jewish printing was in fact clear even as early as the publication of *Arba'ah Turim*, which has been viewed by modern scholars as allowing for “the formation of a connected Early Modern Jewish culture.”<sup>18</sup>
- 7 Another facade of mobility in Istanbul's printing trade, as with all trades, was the flow of patronage and funding afforded by wealthy members of the community. One such patron was Esther Kira, who supported scholars and paid for the printing expenses of the astronomer and mathematician Abraham Zacuto's 1566 genealogical chronicle. Another notable patron was Joseph Nasi, who set up a press in the palace Belvedere.<sup>19</sup> These patrons came from diverse backgrounds and acquired their money from international trade. Much of the fluid investment in printing presses, external or internal, did not realize a financial return; other mobile factors of production such as expertise and especially paper made it an expensive venture. *Arba'ah Turim* used Northern Italian paper while a 1505 *Pentateuch* featured French paper.<sup>20</sup> Such

investment nonetheless served as a connection of Istanbul's printing – and all of Ottoman Jewish printing – to the wider world.

## Secularization of Ottoman Texts

- 8 About 800 works in Hebrew characters would come from Istanbul, dealing with topics ranging from religious practice and the study of Hebrew to a Hebrew-French dictionary, Ottoman history, Jewish history, accounts by Jewish travellers, Jewish calendars, astronomy, and occasional translations from Arabic and European literature.<sup>21</sup> Ladino works included a book on religion in 1594, a 1729 translation from a Hebrew prayer book, and the increasing proliferation of secular works such as a translation of Amadis de Gaula in the mid-sixteenth century, an account of the siege of Rhodes, and various histories and dictionaries. One printer alone, Jonah Ashkenazi, published 125 titles, making Istanbul "the metropolitan of Hebrew printing in the entire Middle East."<sup>22</sup> And within the metropolis, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a clear awareness of current events would develop in Ladino as reflected by interest in Ladino newspapers.<sup>23</sup> The evolution towards secularism in mobile printed material paralleled a movement in Turkish-Muslim manuscripts, culminating in Müteferrika's press and the Ottoman newspapers that would be so important in Turkish history.
- 9 Religious texts had long been predominant amidst Istanbul's Jewish printing tradition and the majority Muslim community. Many of the works already mentioned – *Arba'ah Turim*, *Shulhan Aruch*, *Ta'ame haMitzvot* – as well as the first known Ladino book *Dinim de shehitah i bedikah* (The Rules of Ritual Slaughter and Inspection of Animals; 1510) and other Ladino works such as the Book of Psalms (1540), the *Istanbul Pentateuch* (1547), and Bahya Ibn Paquda's *Hovot ha-levavot* (The Duties of the Heart; 1569) were all religious texts designed for conversos fleeing Spain and later Portugal.<sup>24</sup> A similar trend was found amongst the Turkish-Muslim community up to the sixteenth century; religious manuscripts were most popular, and books that were printed in Arabic script abroad for sale in the Empire included the first book printed in Arabic type – the Christian religious *Kitab Salat al-Sawa'I* (Book of Hours; 1514) – and a *Qur'an* from Fano (1537).<sup>25</sup> The entry of printed religious Islamic books was frowned upon and Sultan Murad III banned the import of the *Qur'an* with his 1588 firman.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, the only real differences between Jewish and Muslim book traditions in the Ottoman Empire were an absence of printed books and the mobility implied in their production and sale. Religious books prevailed in both cultures by the mid-sixteenth century.
- 10 Around this time works of a more secular variety began being published within the Ottoman Jewish printing tradition. Rabbi Moses ben Barukh Almosnino published *El Regimiyento de la vida* (The Regimen of Life; 1564) based on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, and Almosnino's *Crónica de los reyes otomanos* (The Chronicle of the Ottoman Kings; 1567), while never put to print, can be considered the first original narrative in Ladino. Various Hebrew grammars were published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>27</sup> There were also many Arabic manuscripts containing important science. While the demand for secular texts remained limited in Jewish and Muslim communities alike during this period,<sup>28</sup> the simple fact of their circulation was an important forerunner to their eventual growth in popularity.

## The Mütferrika Press

- 11 The mobility of printing in Istanbul and the Ottoman Empire, and whatever long-term trends of secularization its fruits could bear for historians, underwent tremendous changes during the Tulip Era (1718–1730) and the advent of the Mütferrika press. This innovation based in Istanbul combined previous forces in mobility, cultural exchange and marketplace dynamics – either in spirit or through direct interaction with minority communities – and opened them up for scrutiny on the international stage and for their effects to spread through the Empire.
- 12 No historian of Ottoman printing can escape the question of why: why did it take nearly three hundred years for print technology to be adopted by the dominant community? A wide array of reasons has been provided. Rifaat Ali Abou-el-Haj indicated that the Ottomans were selective and strategic in their uptake of technology.<sup>29</sup> Landau proposed similar suspicion of European technical innovations in addition to the fear of undermining Islam, the rule of the Sultan, or the guild of scribes.<sup>30</sup> Schwartz proved that many claims of Islamic, Sultanic or scribal prejudice against print were unfounded,<sup>31</sup> although the post-Mütferrika occurrence of a staged mock funeral for the pens and inkwells of scribes offers a retort.<sup>32</sup> Shefer-Mossensohn provided numerous reasons for the late adoption, some of the more novel ones being fine manuscripts enjoying a cultural and market status, a newer and lower quality of manuscript being able to compete with printed books, and the existence of an oral culture based on memory.<sup>33</sup> Sabev in his article mentioned two noteworthy historical accounts: the pre-eighteenth century Katib Çelebi's explicit complaint about the lack of printing facilities for maps, and Antoine Galland's mention that there was little market for printed books. İbrahim Peçeви, a seventeenth century historian, considered printing an "odd art."<sup>34</sup> An up-to-date account of Nemeth raises the possibility that a market hadn't developed due to the difficulty in casting and correctly placing Arabic script.<sup>35</sup> All these potential causes point generally to the existence of an unassailable manuscript culture that would give way to the Mütferrika press only by sufficient pressure from the Sultan and certain interested and highly motivated parties.
- 13 Mütferrika was one such party, and while his press was kept alive almost entirely by his own herculean efforts, it only survived for so long. After attempting for eight years, he procured support from authorities in 1726 by writing a treatise on the utility of printing (*Er-Risāletü'l-müsemma bi-Vesīletü't-Tibā'a*). The application was approved by the grand vizier and decreed by the Sultan in 1727. One of Mütferrika's partners, Said Efendi, withdrew in the early 1730s and Mütferrika continued the endeavor on his own.<sup>36</sup> The press produced seventeen books of an educational nature, such as dictionaries and books on history and geography, before it was shuttered in 1742 – a move made permanent by Mütferrika's death shortly thereafter.<sup>37</sup> There was little market for a printing press that retained the difficulties inherent to Arabic print while concurrently barred by the Sultan from producing religious texts. Why did the press open during the Tulip Era? How did it interact with the pre-existing print tradition of Ottoman Jews and other cultures? And what did European intellectuals think of it?

## Ottoman Press: Western Modernization or Long Development?

- 14 The Tulip Era in Istanbul was characterized by a culture of leisure, obvious consumerism, cosmopolitanism, religious tolerance, and interest in philosophy. There was an elite fascination with the Western lifestyle, society, technology and military organization.<sup>38</sup> In 1732, for example, Müteferrika himself wrote a reform treatise praising the structure and good order of the “Christian” (European) armies.<sup>39</sup> He mentioned threats from the West in his 1726 treatise on the usefulness of printing.<sup>40</sup> As recently as 1699 the Ottoman government had been forced to accept by treaty that former Ottoman territories would remain in enemy hands. Print itself could be useful for war in the form of pamphlets.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the Müteferrika press was used as a means of achieving all types of reforms; the printing press created a “new genre of state-oriented text” within a hybrid-state actor.<sup>42</sup> Amongst these new genres was the book on physics, *Fruit of the Tree*, which expounded practical knowledge including medicine, astrology and alchemy within the context of state building.<sup>43</sup>
- 15 There is no denying that Müteferrika, Efendi and Grand Vizier Nevşehirli Damat İbrahim Paşa were enamored with European science and society and sought their implementation. The embassy of Efendi to France in 1720, for example, was established to promote such institutional reforms. The historian Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall set the precedent that the printing press was an outgrowth of this.<sup>44</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to believe that this was the onset of modernity or Westernization. Historian Jonathan Bloom wrote that the circulation of printed books in the Ottoman Empire since the sixteenth century and previous interest in printing presses indicated a long-term onset of modernity.<sup>45</sup> The Ottoman Empire contained its own scientific corpus, luxuries and technological innovations, and, as discussed, the printing press and its mobility had existed in the Jewish community for centuries continuously. Although the Tulip Era and Western openness ended abruptly in 1730 with a conservative uprising, the printing press and other technological advances persisted.
- 16 There was, additionally, some important interplay between the older Ottoman Jewish printing tradition and that which was burgeoning within its Turkish-Muslim host. Purchasing equipment and hiring experts could be more readily achieved from within the Empire, although this was not the absolute rule. Ottoman printing presses and type moulds were purchased from Jews and Christians alike.<sup>46</sup> Experts were employed from minority printing communities in the Müteferrika press, particularly the previously mentioned Jonah Ashkenazi, who had made Istanbul into the capital of Middle Eastern Jewish printing by the eighteenth century. Ashkenazi designed and cast the Arabic letters of the press and provided advice on its overall operation.<sup>47</sup>
- 17 Meanwhile the European intellectual sphere viewed the Ottoman adoption of printing technology with mixed reactions. Some saw it as the beginning of modernity while others argued against such an abrupt inception. The Ottoman press had many ties to Europe: Said Efendi had accompanied his father on missions to Paris in October 1721, eventually becoming ambassador to France,<sup>48</sup> and Müteferrika was himself a Hungarian-Christian convert. Müteferrika would begin a correspondence with the Marquis de Caumont through Charles de Peyssonnel about the Ottoman press. Although within this correspondence there was hesitation to integrate Turkey into the Republic



of Letters, there was agreement that the press was a positive step. The *Mercure de France* emphasized continuity with a preceding Turkish intellectual tradition and Peyssonnel recognized that the education of Ottoman elites was not affected by the adoption of printing.<sup>49</sup>

## Modern Parallels Between Ottoman and Jewish Print

- 18 The Jews of Istanbul, having long been acquainted with the mobility of print and its rapid dissemination of texts, were beginning to print for larger audiences around the time of mainstream Ottoman print. *Me'am Loez* (From a Foreign People; 1730) marked the shift to increasing dominance of Ladino works intended for the general public. Matthias Lehmann wrote that it was an "immense project of a comprehensive Bible commentary... marked the beginning of a flourishing vernacular literature in the eastern Sephardic diaspora... and provided a frame of reference for the considerable output of Ladino religious literature during the following two centuries."<sup>50</sup> The book offered a simple writing style that would be imitated by secular Ladino writers. It was followed in the same century by an important secular Ladino work from Livorno, *La Guerta de Oro* (The Golden Flower Garden; 1778) by David Attias, which stressed secular topics and education.<sup>51</sup> Ladino publications began focusing on practical matters while translations of secular works increased during the nineteenth century.
- 19 Another parallel emerged in the nineteenth century between Ottoman and Jewish print cultures: newspapers. Sultan Mahmut II, seeking to communicate with domestic and international audiences, called for the publication of ideologically driven journals. The first official newspaper was *Takvim-i Vekayi*, founded in Istanbul in 1831 and staffed by government officials. Another newspaper, *Tercüman-i Ahval*, would become the first private and independent Turkish language newspaper of the Ottoman Empire, and London-based *Hürriyet* (1868) would serve as the mouthpiece of the society which by then started to call itself "the Young Ottomans." The first Jewish (Ladino) newspaper was published in Izmir shortly after the first Ottoman periodical, in 1842.<sup>52</sup> Another journal, *Sha'arei mizrach*, appeared in Izmir in 1845 and offered a more secular Ladino worldview.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

- 20 The long-term evolution of Ottoman Jewish printing, localized mostly in Istanbul, developed in parallel to certain trends in Ottoman literature while at times influencing them. They both displayed signs of secularization fairly early on and were not "religious monoliths." Once print technology was adopted by the Ottomans, both cultures produced books for the general public, and both cultures nearly coterminously deployed newspapers. The mobility endemic to the Jewish printing press was important for its evolution and mirrored that of the eventual Ottoman press and its international perceptions. Even certain physical technologies such as printing presses, type moulds and human expertise were shared. These two print cultures did not evolve in a vacuum; they existed alongside each other, interacting over the long term and without necessarily coming into being as the result of an influx of modernity. In assessing these connections, a historian can, at the least, build a continuous and long-term narrative of Ottoman print culture without limiting its scope in terms of time and place.



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## ABSTRACTS

It was only in 1727 that the first Turkish-Muslim printing house was established by Ibrahim Müteferrika with the support of Sultan Ahmed III. It came into existence in Istanbul at the beginning of the eighteenth century during a peaceful interlude known as the Tulip Era – a brief period characterized by increasing consumerism, religious tolerance, interest in philosophy and openness to the West. Many reasons have been put forward for this late adoption: Sultan's firmans, opposition from scribes, lack of a market for printed texts, and the difficulty in printing Arabic script. What forms of mobility in print material and technology existed before 1727 in the Ottoman Empire, and how did they interact with the creation of a Turkish-Muslim printing press during the Tulip Era? It was Rabbi Jacob ben Asher's incunabulum of 1493 – "Four Rows" – that marked the inauguration of printing of any type in the Ottoman Empire. This text will be briefly analyzed, along with the ensuing centuries-long Hebrew and Ladino print traditions, and finally their continuation through the Tulip Era. This article will frame the historical development of Jewish print culture in Istanbul and the Ottoman Empire from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth century while situating it within the international marketplace. The exchanges between the intercontinental Jewish print culture, the first Turkish-Muslim printing house, and European intellectuals emphasize interconnectedness as well as the reimagining of the Tulip Era not as the initial thrust of Ottoman "modernization" but rather the amalgamation of previous technological and socioeconomic forces. Using Ottoman Jewish printing as a comprehensive example, "modernization" in the Ottoman Empire is shown to have occurred over many centuries, with its achievement the result of a blending of different coexisting cultures and trends.

Foi só em 1727 que foi criada a primeira tipografia turco-muçulmana, por Ibrahim Müteferrika, com o apoio do Sultão Ahmed III. Surgiu em Istambul no início do século XVIII, durante uma fase pacífica conhecido como a *Era das Tulipas* – um breve período caracterizado pelo aumento do

consumismo, da tolerância religiosa, do interesse pela filosofia e por abertura ao Ocidente. Foram apresentadas muitas razões para que esta adoção fosse tardia: *firmans* sultânicos, oposição dos escribas, falta de mercado para os textos impressos e dificuldade em imprimir com caracteres árabes. Que formas de mobilidade, tanto no material impresso como na tecnologia, existiam, antes de 1727, no Império Otomano, e como interagiram com o despontar de uma imprensa turco-muçulmana durante a *Era das Tulipas*? Foi o incunábolo "Quatro Colunas" do Rabino Jacob ben Asher, de 1493, que marcou o início da impressão no Império Otomano. Esse texto será analisado de forma breve, juntamente com as tradições seculares de impressão hebraica e ladina que se seguiram e, finalmente, a continuação desta durante a *Era das Tulipas*. Este artigo irá enquadrar historicamente o desenvolvimento da cultura impressa judaica em Istambul e no Império Otomano, do século XV ao século XVIII, ao mesmo tempo que a situa no contexto do mercado internacional. Os intercâmbios entre a cultura impressa judaica intercontinental, a primeira gráfica turco-muçulmana e os intelectuais europeus enfatizam essas interligações, assim como a reconfiguração da *Era das Tulipas*, não como o impulso inicial da "modernização" otomana, mas antes como um amalgamar de tendências tecnológicas e socioeconômicas anteriores. Utilizando a impressão judaica otomana como um exemplo abrangente, percebe-se que a "modernização" no Império Otomano ocorreu ao longo de muitos séculos, sendo a sua concretização o resultado de uma mistura de diferentes culturas e tendências que coexistiam.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Ottoman, Jewish, print, mobility, modernization

**Palavras-chave:** otomano, judaico, impressão, mobilidade, modernização

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